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## Customer Retention Strategies in the Fitness Industry

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Rodney W. Macon

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Customer Retention Strategies in the Fitness Industry

by

Rodney W. Macon

MBA, Webster University, 2011

BS, Excelsior College, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

January 2020

## Abstract

In the health and fitness club business, acquiring new customers can be problematic for business leaders and may hinder sustainability. Grounded in customer retention management theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies health and fitness club managers used to improve customer retention. The participants were 6 health and fitness club managers who succeeded in improving customer retention while employed at 5 fitness clubs in Southeast Texas. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, a review of company websites, and social media pages. General and inductive analysis were used to analyze the data. One overarching theme, service quality, and 2 subthemes, including customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, arose from the analysis. The implications for positive social change include the potential for business leaders to create sustainable employment. Further implications include providing better health outcomes for customers, reducing costs for customers, and improving the quality of life within the community by using local service providers and generating revenue for the local economy.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to those in my life who supported me during my pursuit of this degree. Additionally, I dedicate this dissertation to those who may benefit from the results of this research.

## Acknowledgments

A special thank you to my family for their encouragement and unwavering support during my pursuit of the DBA degree. I offer a special thank you to Dr. Timothy Malone and my committee members for taking the time to review this study and provide critical and meticulous assessments. Dr. Malone and the committee members challenged me, tested me, and gave me the tools I needed to improve this study. Thank you for your insight, wisdom, intelligence, and determination to keep me on track. Your feedback was, is, and will always be invaluable.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

A global transformation and a massive expansion in the fitness industry began in the 1970s and continues today (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016). This expansion coincides with a public that increasingly values health and physical appearance (Markula, 2017). The fitness industry is an organization that focuses on the general state of customers' bodies, is one of the fastest-growing industries in the U.S. labor market (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016). This growth relies on the continued patronage of existing customers (Hurley, 2004), yet managers of health and fitness clubs frequently overlook existing customers during the recruitment process. Hurley (2004) claimed that management, customer retention, and customer service should form the framework for productivity within the fitness industry. Other authors argued that factors such as customer relations at the club, customer commitment, and frequency of weekly attendance affect a customer's likelihood of renewing his or her membership (Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010).

In this study, I explored the customer retention strategies used by managers of health and fitness clubs with the intent to identify strong predictors of customer retention in health club settings. Study participants were managers in health and fitness clubs who played significant roles in customer retention. The results of this study could benefit both customers and managers of health and fitness clubs by outlining the most effective strategies to improve customer retention. Improved customer retention could lead to increased revenue for the business while also improving the health of the customer.

## **Background of the Problem**

Physical fitness is one of the pillars of good health and can contribute to increased longevity and other measures of human well-being (Seals, Justice, & LaRocca, 2016). For those who want to achieve physical fitness, and for those who wish to profit from that desire, it is essential to understand people's motivation to be physically active (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017). From a health and well-being perspective, being physically active has a multitude of health and psychological benefits, including decreased risk of Type II diabetes, heart disease, and certain forms of cancer, enhanced cognitive functioning; and improved quality of life (Riebe et al., 2015).

The continued financial success of the fitness industry depends on the ability of managers to improve customer retention (Hurley, 2004). García Fernández et al. (2018) argued that to increase customer retention, health and fitness club managers need to consider diverse customer retention strategies. The health and fitness club industry relies on reoccurring revenue from current customers. The focus must remain on retaining them. Having what motivates customer participation in health and fitness club is of the utmost importance to managers (Schroeder, Welk, Franke, & Lee, 2017).

Therefore, a current major challenge for health and fitness club managers is to understand how to retain customers more effectively. Managers must keep customers satisfied by providing quality services, thereby creating loyalty and retaining the customers (Ferrand et al., 2010). The objective of my study is to determine how health and fitness club managers successfully use quality services and other generators of loyalty to improve customer retention.

### **Problem Statement**

Whereas managers of health and fitness clubs often focus on acquiring new customers, it is less clear how managers should best retain their customers (Fader & Toms, 2018). In a survey by Market Force Information, 24% of health club members expressed dissatisfaction with their gyms, and 25% of participants said they would not recommend their gyms to others (Dominic, 2017). The general business problem is that some health and fitness club managers should develop strategies to improve customer retention. The specific business problem is that some health and fitness club managers lack strategies to improve customer retention.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to find the strategies that health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention. The participants were six managers from five health and fitness clubs in Southeast Texas who have had success improved customer retention. The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase employment opportunities and to provide better health outcomes for customers of health and fitness clubs. The information health and fitness club managers provide may contribute to social change and improve customer retention for health and fitness clubs. The recommendations of this doctoral study may include new strategies to improve customer retention. The likely implications for positive social change also include an increase in sustainable business practices.

### **Nature of the Study**

Researchers can use either qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods to approach research questions (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Watson (2015) defined qualitative research as a means of studying or observing individual and group issues that are hard to measure numerically. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring issues in depth (Yin, 2018). Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding how individuals experience a phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). The quantitative method is not appropriate for this study because I could not use this method to explore participants' feelings, experiences, observations, and relevant documentation.

In contrast, Researchers using quantitative methods rely on numerical data for insights (Maxwell, 2016). The goal of this study was to determine how health and fitness club managers improve customer retention. The mixed methods approach combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Yin, 2018). The mixed methods were not appropriate for this study because I could use the quantitative element to explore participants' feelings, experiences, observations, and relevant documentation.

I used a multiple case study approach. The case study design can assist with uncovering insights and exploring the phenomenon to promote deeper understanding (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The ethnographic design is a qualitative research approach to explore culture in a real-life setting (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study because my intention was not to study a cultural group. Levy (2015) surmised that researchers use the phenomenological design to describe a phenomenon through the perceptions and lived experiences of the subjects.

Therefore, the phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because exploring participants' experiences and perceptions were not my intent. A case study design is suitable for studying complex systems (Stake, 1995).

### **Research Question**

The central research question of this study was *What strategies do some health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention?*

### **Interview Questions**

1. Regarding retaining customers, what are some best practices for your health and fitness company?
2. What are some of the barriers to improving customer retention for your health and fitness company?
3. What are some of the causes of customer attrition?
4. What types of loyalty programs have been successful in improving customer retention for your health and fitness company?
5. How might you identify customers who are most likely to discontinue their memberships?
6. What sort of customer engagement strategies has led to improved customer retention for your health and fitness company?
7. What causes customers to switch to a competitor of your health and fitness company?
8. What switching costs do your customers experience when moving to a competitor?



9. What loyalty programs have you implemented that support the retention of customers?
10. What additional information can you provide relating to strategies your health and fitness company uses to improve customer retention?
11. How has social media affected your ability to retain customers in your health and fitness club?
12. How have you leveraged technology within your health and fitness club to retain your customers?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this doctoral study was the customer retention management theory of Ahmad and Buttle (2002). The premise of this theory is that organizations retain customers by providing superior service and satisfaction (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). Therefore, managers should consider all phases of service, industrial, and general marketing to satisfy the customer. Ahmad and Buttle stated that from a service market perspective, the way to retain customers is to improve perceived service quality and satisfaction. The conceptual framework also incorporates a review of the concepts associated with strategies for marketing professionals in the fitness industry use to improve customer retention. The conceptual framework is a guide to align strategic theories with the idea of improving customer retention and its effects on health and fitness clubs.

I obtained data for this doctoral study by conducting interviews and sourcing peer-reviewed articles that focus on customer retention strategies and customer loyalty.

The findings from this study may provide health and fitness club managers with new strategies to increase their customer retention rates. The incorporation of customer retention management theory into the conceptual framework may assist in the identification and exploration of the strategies necessary to improve customer retention.

### **Operational Definitions**

The following definitions may help the reader to understand the meanings and applications of the terms.

*Assurance:* Assurance is a measure of a combination of items that assess competence, courtesy, credibility, and security (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). Assurance also involves the ability of the organization's employees to inspire trust and confidence in the organization through their knowledge and courtesy. In the context of fitness clubs, this dimension has elements of physical beauty and a service delivery approach or customer relationship management (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015).

*Customer loyalty:* Customer loyalty is the customer's intent to do repeat business with a company (Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015).

*Customer perceived value:* Customer perceived value is a component assessment of consumers' perception of the exchange of time, money, or energy compared to the item or services received (Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2016). It is the anticipated benefit from a consumer's perspective of a product or service.

*Customer relationship management:* Customer relationship management is the method of creating and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering

superior customer value and satisfaction to improve business relationships with customers (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016).

*Customer satisfaction:* Customer satisfaction is customers' perceptions of perceived performance and expected performance (Ali & Raza, 2017).

*Empathy:* Empathy represents a combination of items, including assessing, communicating with, and understanding the customer; hence, it leads to personalized attention for the customer ((Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). Empathy also relates to the fitness club's service delivery style and relationship with customers (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). Empathy also affects perceived service quality, fitness trainers, instructors, and fitness staff who interact with customers (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015).

*Reliability:* Reliability is the ability to deliver the promised service dependably and consistently ((Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). Customers in health and fitness clubs expect clubs to provide services in a safe and active environment (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015).

*Responsiveness:* Responsiveness stands for willingness to help customers and to provide prompt services ((Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). Responsiveness concerns the fitness clubs' delivery styles and relationships with customers. Fitness clubs are more likely to lag in responsiveness, as their primary goal is to provide attractive physical environments (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015).

*Servicescape:* Servicescape, or the service setting, is the atmosphere and physical environment in which service occurs (K. T. Kim, Bae, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2016).

*Tangibles*: Tangibles are the physical facilities and the appearance of personnel and equipment ((Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015). In the fitness industry, this dimension is more likely to contribute to the highest variation in service quality, because fitness clubs provide physical beauty in staff and facilities, and they give little attention to customer relationship management (Jagadeesan & Chinnadurai, 2015).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

An assumption is any acknowledged idea that a researcher believes is factual, but cannot verify (Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2017). In this study, I assumed that the health and fitness club managers in the target population would offer new information regarding improving customer retention strategies. I also assumed that this information would include reasons for failures in customer retention strategies that would provide the information necessary to improve customer retention. As with all research that includes interviews, I assumed that all participants would answer honestly.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses or potential weaknesses of the research that are beyond the control of the researcher (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). The qualitative exploratory multiple case study was limited to six managers at five Southeast Texas-based health and fitness clubs. Limitations included the limited time to complete the study and the small number of available participants. Because the participant pool is small, the research findings may not be generalizable to other populations.

**Delimitations**

Franzon, Englander, Axtelius, and Klinge (2018) stated that delimitations are restriction boundaries that affect the scope of a study. This study aimed to determine the successful customer retention strategies used by some health and fitness club managers. A delimitation is that I used a small sample of health and fitness club owners in Southeastern Texas, so the participants may not present an accurate picture of current strategies to improve customer retention.

**Significance of the Study**

The financial success of service industries may benefit from both customer acquisition and customer retention. The financial success and growth of health and fitness clubs rely on their ability to retain current customers (Hurley, 2004). Hurley (2004) indicated that there is a direct correlation between customer retention and leadership engagement. With this study, I aimed to characterize how managers of health and fitness clubs have improved customer retention.

**Contribution to Business Practice**

This study may be of value to health and fitness clubs by offering ways to improve customer retention and to avoid lost patronage. The findings may enable managers to avoid the limitations and effects of customer attrition. Implementing strategies based on the findings of this study might improve customer loyalty. My goal was to explore how implementing more effective customer retention strategies may reduce customer attrition. The findings may contribute to the business effectiveness of

health and fitness clubs through improved customer retention (Lins, Servaes, & Tamayo, 2017).

### **Implications for Social Change**

Characterizing and communicating the best strategies to retain customers in a health and fitness setting has wide-ranging implications for customers, businesses, and the larger community. For example, Saghi and Lotfabadi (2016) argued that, among the various approaches in the field of social change, some approaches focus on the impacts of health education and health promotion on the larger society. These authors posited that if managers of health and fitness clubs improved their customer retention strategies, customers might be motivated to maintain and improve their health and fitness. Improved services that lead to enhanced health outcomes for health and fitness clubs' customers create positive social change. Findings and recommendations from this study may contribute to positive social change by enhancing customer health.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Because health and fitness clubs are service-oriented organizations that prioritize the needs of customers, one of their main challenges is retaining customers (Moreira & Silva, 2016). However, García-Fernández, Bernal-Garcia, Fernández-Gavira, and Vélez-Colón (2014) reviewed and analyzed existing literature relating to the fitness industry and found a mismatch between what fitness clubs should be doing and what they are doing to retain customers. In this literature review, I have synthesized peer-reviewed articles on the concepts of customer retention in the fitness industry. I assessed the different perspectives surrounding the central research question: What strategies do health and

fitness club managers use to improve customer retention? Analyzing the literature provided an insight into how researchers, scholars, and marketing practitioners view customer retention and the associated processes.

I began the initial search for journal articles, doctoral studies, and books written by business and marketing experts using the Walden University Library databases about customer retention. A primary search from Business Source Complete, ABI/INFORM Complete, Emerald Management Journals, SAGE Premier, and PsycINFO produced a variety of articles encompassing marketing theories and their past and current practices. Supplementary searches using multidisciplinary databases such as Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, Science Direct, and Google Scholar added sources for an informative and comprehensive review of current customer retention practices.

I used the following terms and keywords for my preliminary search: *customer engagement, customer knowledge management, customer relationship management, relationship marketing, word of mouth, customer relations, customer satisfaction, customer retention, customer services, customer loyalty, consumer behavior, consumer research, quality of service, physical fitness centers, marketing, marketing strategy, leadership, and management.*

All the articles are from peer-reviewed journals. I have based the literature review on scholarly works and professional books. The publication dates are within 5 years of my study. The references comprise 158 peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters. I have based this literature review on 75 sources, which are all peer-reviewed journal articles, and 67 of these sources are from 2015 or later (85%). The total number of peer-

reviewed sources from 2015 and later is 138 (89%). A further 20 (11%) of the articles are peer-reviewed, but they date from 2014 or before.

### **Organization of the Literature Review**

With the comprehensive searches in these research databases, I discovered a variety of sources for this study. Peer-reviewed articles on customer retention, customer loyalty, traditional marketing strategies, customer engagement, and quality of service came up in my search. My exploration of sources encompassed themes such as consumer engagement, trust, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, relationship and knowledge management, and social media marketing. I organized these sources and themes into subsections that featured essential themes relating to the research question and the conceptual framework.

I organized the literature review into subsections on related topics. The literature review features essential themes relating to the research question and the conceptual framework. The specific focus area is customer retention in the fitness industry. Through the literature, I have reviewed a litany of variables that affect customer retention strategies. Garcia Fernandez et al. (2014) reviewed and analyzed existing literature relating to the fitness industry, and they found a mismatch between what fitness clubs should be doing and what they are doing to retain customers. My overall objective for this literature review was to identify variables that impact customer retention in general and in the fitness industry. The existing literature indicated that customer loyalty, service quality, and customer satisfaction are significant factors in customer retention for health



and fitness clubs (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2014). Therefore, I used these themes to organize my discussion of customer retention.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used the customer retention management theory of Ahmad and Buttle (2002) to form the conceptual framework for the qualitative multiple case study presented here. This theory posits that the retention of customers hinges on perceived superior customer service and by high levels of customer satisfaction achieved by managing the expectations of customers (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). However, the connection between customer retention and a company's increased revenue is questionable, indicating that managers should not focus on customer retention to improve revenue (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002).

The concept of customer retention is fully recognized as an essential variable to consider when developing a comprehensive business plan. Customer retention is essential to managers in inundated markets or when the number of new customers is in a constant decline (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). Ascarza et al. (2018) acknowledged customer retention as a crucial objective of relationship marketing, predominantly because retaining customers costs less than acquiring new ones. Dawkins and Reichheld (1990) noted that when companies retained customers, the net present value of customers increased, resulting in increased revenue (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). Therefore, customer retention is of significant concern to any business in which repeat consumption is an option.

There are three main perspectives on customer retention: service marketing, industrial marketing, and general management. From a marketing perspective, companies

retain customers by forging multilevel relationships involving financial, social, and structural bonds, and researchers have examined this aspect of customer retention by examining customer service quality and satisfaction (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). For example, Alshurideh (2016) posited that customer retention is the focus of all marketing plans and actions that seek the retention of customers by establishing, maintaining, and maximizing the mutual long-term benefits that strengthen and extend the relationship between two parties. The foundation of the relationship between consumer and firm is the result of engaging in a continuous process of exchange of mutual benefit. Essentially, customer retention suggests a long-term relationship between customer and firm (Alshurideh, 2016).

Alshurideh (2016) posited that customer retention is the focus of all marketing plans and actions that seek the retention of customers by establishing, maintaining, and maximizing the mutual long-term benefits that strengthen and extend the relationship between two parties. The foundation of the relationship between consumer and firm is the result of engaging in a continuous process of exchange of mutual benefit. Essentially, customer retention suggests a long-term relationship between customer and firm (Alshurideh, 2016).

Customer retention is a mutually beneficial exchange between the customers and business. Chuang and Tai (2016) postulated that customer retention strategies aim to maximize economic and noneconomic benefits and to encourage more exchange processes in the future. Companies try to affect consumer behavior by providing perceived customer value to increase customer loyalty. Effective customer retention

benefits health and fitness operations through increased revenue generation. Relationship benefits are essential prerequisites for relationship establishment, exchange, and relationship continuation (Alshurideh, 2016). Chuang and Tai (2016) posited that retaining customers in competitive environments is critical for any company's survival.

### **Customer Retention**

The customer is the most critical person in any form of business, and without the customer, the business would not exist. Satisfied customers are a company's relationship capital. Acquiring companies will pay for the plant, equipment, and brand name, but also the current customer base (Mandal, 2016). However, acquiring new customers is costly because of the need to invest time, energy, and resources in developing relationships (Mandal, 2016). Companies need to understand their customers. In service industries, the best way to retain customers is to improve customer perceived service quality, and consequently, customer satisfaction. Both service quality and customer relationships directly influence customer retention (Mandal, 2016).

Some service firms with high customer attrition rates find difficulty in growing the company's customer base. Some of these service firms include health and fitness clubs, hotels, and commercial airlines. Sometimes despite extensive retention efforts, customers still leave. Kumar, Bhagwat, and Zhang (2015) agreed that in some cases, customer attrition might benefit the firm by attracting lost loyal customers back. Some pertinent questions remain regarding whether lost customers are worth the investment of attracting them back and whether they will remain profitable if they return. Fitness clubs provide a unique form of service and may yield specific answers to these questions.

Health and fitness clubs and the nature of recreational physical fitness activities have changed since the 1960s (Stern, 2008). Private fitness centers (health and fitness clubs) were ubiquitous features of the American landscape, and centralized ownership characterized the field from 1970 onward. Fitness centers also emerged as social centers where business people went to see and meet other customers (Stern, 2008). The focus on the body and formalized exercise developed for a segment of the population, a more significant portion of the population grew increasingly obese, creating health concerns in all age groups. Individuals from both these groups became customers at health clubs to actualize their concepts of health, beauty, professional success, sexuality, emphasized athleticism, and good muscle tone (Stern, 2008). During the 1980s, the health and fitness club industry contributed to the physical insecurities of consumers by promoting a toned, bulked, pumped, and chemically and surgically altered body (Stern, 2008). As health and fitness clubs evolved in response, the strategies used by managers for serving and retaining customers also changed.

Physical activity and exercise are necessary for maintaining good health. In health and fitness clubs, customers predominantly exercise for health benefits (Middelkamp & Steenbergen, 2015). Exercise is planned and structured, with repetitive body movements to improve or maintain health (Lee, Jackson, & Richardson, 2017). According to the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA; 2015), about 140 million people have a paid membership to a health and fitness club. This global figure demonstrates the understood importance of physical activity among a segment of the population.

With the recognition of the importance of physical fitness, fitness and health clubs are a rapidly growing business sector. Gonçalves and Diniz (2015) posited that increased awareness of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and physical activity has led to an increase in customers at health and fitness clubs. Researchers have found that people join health and fitness clubs because of the perceived value of achieving their fitness and health goals. Therefore, managers do not typically see a shortage of new memberships. However, the growth of health and fitness clubs depends on the challenge of successful customer retention (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015). Customer perception of service quality is significant for customer retention, so managers must provide an environment that encourages customers to reach their health and fitness goals (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015).

Health and fitness clubs have always had challenges in maintaining membership. Sperandei, Vieira, and Reis (2016) concluded that only about 3.7% of customers continue their gym activities for longer than 12 consecutive months, and 50% of customers abandon patronage within 90 days of membership. Managers can reduce customer attrition through enhanced customer engagement. For example, managers of health and fitness clubs can provide personal trainers instead of letting members figure out the process on their own. They can also provide goal sheets or memory cards to record physical goals during workouts, and not just during the signup process. Customer retention is an essential phenomenon in a saturated market or a low-growth market with few new customers (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002).

Customer retention is a primary objective of relationship marketing (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). The primary reason is that retaining customers costs less than acquiring

new customers. Therefore, managers should direct more effort toward customer retention than new customer attraction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Premkumar and Rajan (2017) noted that two factors affect poor retention rates: declining market growth and the complexity of customer retention. Premkumar and Rajan (2017) posited that customer retention has a positive effect on revenue.

**Fitness clubs as service industries.** As the demand for a healthier life increases, the fitness industry, with more than 30,000 health and fitness clubs globally, continues to grow (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014; Chao, 2015). There are approximately 183,900 fitness centers worldwide, with 144.7 million customers, bringing in approximately \$84 billion in revenue annually (IHRSA, 2015). The U.S. private club industry generates more than \$21 billion in annual economic activity (Maier & Prusty, 2016).

As a service industry, health and fitness clubs are unique in that they primarily rely on retaining customers for their financial stability, especially in a competitive market (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Therefore, understanding and improving customer loyalty would help to retain existing customers in these settings (Chao, 2015). When health and fitness club managers do not understand or make the necessary efforts to improve customer loyalty, the results often lead to not meeting customer expectations and reduced customer retention. When this occurs, customers do not have a sense of loyalty toward the health and fitness club (Chao, 2015).

Recent research as demonstrated that customer turnover is a concern in the health and fitness industry (Adebisi, Oyatoye, & Amole, 2017). Therefore, a turnover management strategy for the health and fitness industry that includes improved customer

retention is an essential part of retaining customers. Some managers create lists of potential customers who represent future turnover. As a result, the turnover prediction has received much attention in the literature on marketing and management (Adebiyi et al., 2017).

**Characterizing health club customers.** Most Americans do not engage in adequate regular physical activity despite the well-documented health benefits (Hooker et al., 2016). One indication of physical activity engagement is fitness club membership (Hooker et al., 2016). Even when individuals attempt to become more active by joining a fitness center, estimates suggest that nearly half discontinue their activity within the first three months and cancel within the first six months (Sperandei et al., 2016).

Research that has examined which customers tend to terminate their health club memberships has helped to develop a profile of which customers to target when making attempts to improve customer retention. Fitness club managers must focus on retaining the customers who are least likely to renew their membership (Gonçalves, Meireles, & Carvalho, 2016). Researchers have found that customers with poor psychological wellness (life issues) were more likely to terminate memberships within one year of enrollment (Hooker et al., 2016). Also, Wicker, Coates, and Breuer (2016) suggested that time spent on other activities (work, social life, errands) instead of time in the gym can cause lower customer retention.

Customers join, maintain, and cancel fitness memberships for multiple reasons; some of the reasons for joining included being a role model for children, improving health, and the brand of the company (MacIntosh & Law, 2015). Customers have

reported that they maintain their memberships because of health-related goals, service quality, environmental culture, and values. Some primary reasons for cancellation were cost, lack of time, interest in other physical activity classes like yoga, outdoor exercise, and most prominently, changes to family dynamics (MacIntosh & Law, 2015).

**Retaining health club customers.** A fundamental question facing marketing managers in service organizations such as health clubs is how to allocate scarce marketing resources to retain their best customers (Tarofder, Nikhashemi, Ferdous, Selvantharan, & Haque, 2016). Many organizations devote considerable amounts of money and human resources to develop systems aimed at improving customer retention. Retention of the company's most profitable customers is an excellent way to increase revenue and is significantly less expensive than finding new customers (Tarofder et al., 2016). Likewise, Chattha, Naqi, and Haroon (2016) posited that pursuing new customers requires more resources than retaining the current ones. Successful club management requires multiple leadership skill sets and managerial capabilities including but not limited to (a) relational marketing efforts, (b) quality service delivery, (c) asset management and customer enrollment, and (d) customer retention activities. One notable factor is customer retention. Improving customer retention requires heightened engagement and improved communication with customers (Maier & Prusty, 2016).

Customer retention is a significant driver of customer lifetime value (Becker, Spann, & Schulze, 2015). Customer loyalty is equally vital to the success of an organization. The creation of loyal customers seems critical for the survival of health and fitness clubs. The customer's relationship with a club, commitment, and frequency of



attendance have a positive effect on the intention to repurchase (Ferrand et al., 2010). For customer retention, the environment that gym managers present is critical (Wicker et al., 2016). During enrollment, many health and fitness club customers determine that they will make the sacrifices necessary to benefit from club membership. Club managers must motivate members to put in the time to use club facilities. Without members attending the club, the likelihood of perceived customer value is low. Customer engagement is essential to loyalty (Garon, Masse, & Michaud, 2015).

Even though health club managers are aware of the value of existing customers, most are more interested in the next customer than in retaining existing customers. Rather than continually seeking new customers, health and fitness club managers must place more emphasis on retaining current customers. Hurley (2004) referred to the lack of customer retention as a case of neglect. Developing positive relationships with current customers can improve customer retention (Hurley, 2004). Attraction, social bonding, and identity expression are emerging factors that might affect customer retention (Brashear-Alejandro, Kang, & Groza, 2016). Further research is needed to identify the best strategies to retain health club customers.

Efforts to keep customers engaged and physically inside the facility may serve to retain customers in the long term. To maintain this relationship, managers of health and fitness clubs should offer a variety of services with a duration of an hour or more to keep the customer inside the fitness center. Keeping customers engaged in activities such as classes, training assessments, and programs minimize any likelihood of abandonment (Clavel San Emeterio et al., 2016). Consumers may possess a set of expectations and

evaluations before the purchase, but they cannot experience the emotions of delight or disgust until they purchase (Kim, Vogt, & Knutson, 2015).

Health and fitness club managers must identify and understand their members' behavior and use that behavior to design the services they provide. Understanding this behavior, health and fitness club managers may need to expand standardized services such as aerobic classes, personal training programs, and fitness consultancy. Catering to needs should be the primary concern of managers (García Fernández et al., 2018). Companies should cultivate their customers rather than acquiring new customers, as acquiring the new customers will cost more (Kumar et al., 2015). However, most companies pay little or no attention to the retention of customers (Kumar et al., 2015)

### **Customer Loyalty**

In the marketplace, having loyal customers is critical for firms. Given the changing role of customers, managers must embrace fresh concepts, including the cocreation of value, customers' emotional engagement, customer communities, and customer participation through social media. Leaders must be innovative in reaching out to customers during pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages to promote customer loyalty (Kandampully et al., 2015). One of the main variables that influence customer retention in health and fitness club settings is customer loyalty.

Customer-perceived value, corporate image, and switching costs are vital elements of loyalty and are critical to the length of the customer relationship. When a customer uses a service organization for a short period and decides not to renew the membership because of a perceived lack of value, this negatively affects the corporate

image and customer loyalty. In a health club setting, when customers decide to extend their memberships, this positively affects the corporate image and customer loyalty.

Retaining customers results in a positive corporate image of customer loyalty, and failure to incorporate contingency relationships might lead to increased turnover costs (Ascarza et al., 2018).

**Factors affecting customer loyalty.** Ascarza et al. (2018) stated that corporate image is more relevant than perceived value or turnover costs when a new customer is deciding whether to repurchase. The corporate image remains a determining factor in repurchase decisions, yet customer value continues to play a crucial role in influencing loyalty. The length of the relationship and the customer's perceived value positively influence the barrier to switching. Managers of service organizations must focus on the attributes necessary to enhance customer-perceived value. The relative effect of perceived value on customer loyalty is a significant part of the long-term relationship and repurchase decisions by customers (Ascarza et al., 2018).

Customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, customer retention, and brand loyalty are the four most significant issues facing marketing executives. Managers recognize the benefits of loyal customers for consistent cash flow and increased revenues. Feedback by word of mouth, surveys, and other behavior serve as indicators of future behaviors from customers. Feedback by word of mouth provides practical insights into how the firm allocates resources to improve customer loyalty (Kumar, 2018).

Creating loyal customers is one focal point in business. Brand loyalty, which is essentially the habit of customers, is also an effective means of keeping customers. Brand

loyalty relies on perceived value so that consumers keep purchasing the same products or services from a specific brand rather than choosing another brand or company. Brand loyalty has made the fitness industry a global billion-dollar industry, and it is, therefore, an essential factor (Krivic & Loh, 2016).

**Customer loyalty in fitness clubs.** Customer loyalty is invaluable to health and fitness clubs for membership longevity (García Fernández, Gálvez Ruíz, Fernández Gavira, & Vélez Colón, 2016). To maximize customer lifetime value, the managers of a company must take steps to increase customer loyalty. Attracting new customers cannot be the only focus. Loyalty programs and customer relationship management systems can help managers to develop tools for increasing customer loyalty (Hamilton, Rust, & Dev, 2017). Within the health and fitness industry, managers have taken a variety of approaches to develop and maintain customer loyalty.

Four factors contribute to customer loyalty to health and fitness clubs: switching cost, customer value, physical environment, and customer satisfaction. Switching cost refers to the costs of leaving and joining a competing health and fitness club (Suwono & Shambling, 2016). Health and fitness clubs must offer perceived superior customer value to create loyalty. Customer loyalty in health and fitness clubs is on the decline because of the influence of customer perceived value, satisfaction, and service quality (Lim, Romsa, & Armentrout, 2016). Customer perceived value, satisfaction, and service quality significantly influence customers' psychological commitment and behavioral intentions concerning membership renewal and customer referrals.

The higher the customer's perceived value, satisfaction, and service quality, the higher the customer loyalty will be (Lim et al., 2016). Improving customer value, satisfaction, and service quality generate improved customer loyalty. In an increasingly competitive environment, membership attraction and retention of loyal customers is essential, and this is a challenge to health and fitness clubs. High customer attrition makes revenues uncertain and results in higher marketing costs to acquire new customers. Behavioral measures and customer commitment may determine customer loyalty based on membership renewal intentions and positive word of mouth (Lim et al., 2016).

Managers of health and fitness clubs inferred loyalty from renewal intentions, and they have developed strategic advertising efforts to create a connection between the customer and company (Gürhan-Canli, Hayran, & Sarial-Abi, 2016). Loyalty has become vital in health and fitness clubs because of increased competition. One goal of health and fitness clubs is to create loyal customers, thereby getting them to repurchase products or services. The phenomenon of customer loyalty has received attention in the marketing community, as companies see value in creating customer loyalty through enhanced customer relationships (Tanford, Shoemaker, & Dinca, 2016).

Another strategy to create and maintain brand loyalty and customer satisfaction in health and fitness clubs is to focus on improving the atmosphere. Health and fitness club managers must enable the staff to answer customers' questions and to solve problems in an accurate and timely manner. When health and fitness clubs offer promotions, benefits, and programs not only for their long-term customers, but also for those that have joined recently, this improves customer loyalty (Krivic & Loh, 2016).

Building trust is also imperative to maintaining customer loyalty. For example, instead of canceling scheduled group classes because an instructor is out, fitness clubs should have another instructor ready to prevent customer dissatisfaction. Canceling classes and scheduled events could erode customers' trust, affecting their loyalty. Developing an informed management team and staff to ensure that products and services are at their highest level creates an environment of trust (Krivic & Loh, 2016).

In efforts to retain customers, managers of health and fitness clubs should also focus on customer loyalty programs. A loyalty program is an integrated system of marketing actions that aim to make customers more loyal. These programs are typically membership-based marketing programs that develop relational attitudes and behaviors among customers by providing a range of rewards such as redeemable points, cash, and free goods in exchange for the customer's business. The goal of these programs is to enhance customer relationships. These enhanced relationships lead to increases in customers' loyalty, causing repeat purchases, convincing other potential customers through word of mouth, discouraging existing customers from switching, and resulting in increased sales, total revenue, and total profit (Tanford et al., 2016). Loyalty programs must have two objectives: to be different from competitors in a way that is meaningful to customers and to provide relevant rewards to the individual customer (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018).

Bijmolt, Krafft, Sese, and Viswanathan (2018) stated that loyalty programs endow customers with a status they earn through purchases or other actions. These customers can become advocates for the company because of these loyalty programs. Loyalty

programs help the business process by identifying, maintaining, and increasing the yield from the best customers through an interactive relationship. Loyalty programs also help to build and preserve stronger customer relationships. Loyal customers are a valuable source of future revenue streams and a good source for market intelligence. Loyal customers are willing to share insights into their needs and to enable the firm to tailor products, pricing, distribution channels, and marketing communications (Bijmolt et al., 2018).

Loyalty programs are becoming influential in customer retention (Tanford et al., 2016). Gaining customer loyalty is an essential goal of marketing and loyalty programs. Loyalty programs drive purchase behavior (Bijmolt & Verhoef, 2017).

The absence of customer loyalty programs in health and fitness settings could hurt customer trust, commitment, and loyalty (Baloglu, Zhong, & Tanford, 2017). Fitness clubs with loyalty programs are more likely to survive in a competitive market in which retaining customers is a challenge. Loyalty programs could play a role by rewarding current customers for their patronage. Such programs help to promote trust by rewarding customers for their patronage (Silalahi, Alfansi, & Wiardi, 2017).

Also, customer loyalty programs and brand loyalty can contribute to customer loyalty. Brands can produce feelings or emotions that determine customer experience. Customers who have a positive experience toward a brand may believe the product or service is reliable, trustworthy, and valuable, and that the brand may be willing to give priority to the customer's benefit. The customer's perception of brand trust influences

customer loyalty, and this encourages customers to repurchase services in the future and to build up more commitment (Silalahi et al., 2017).

### **Service Quality**

Customer loyalty is driven in part by service quality, which in turn drives customer retention in any service-oriented business. While satisfaction is significantly better among experienced customers, service quality is novice customers (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Service quality affects satisfaction across both novices and experienced customers, and it is a vital component for retaining customers. Customers have an expectation of service quality based on their membership types and the clubs they attend, and they expect their fitness clubs to provide superior service quality (Dhurup, 2017).

Therefore, customer experience should be at the forefront of the activities of health and fitness club managers and staff. Managers and staff must continue to assess customers regularly to gauge service quality (Gonçalves & Diniz, 2015). Researchers consider service quality as the primary antecedent of customer satisfaction. The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is positive, and it indicates that higher service quality may increase customer satisfaction (Ramamoorthy, Gunasekaran, Roy, Rai, & Senthilkumar, 2018).

Results of previous research demonstrate that service quality is a multidimensional construct, consisting of both technical and functional quality (Ismail & Yunan, 2016). Useful service quality should have five specific dimensions: tangibility (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of workers), reliability (ability to perform



the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of workers and their abilities to inspire trust and confidence), and empathy (caring, individualized attention the organization provides to customers; Herstein, Gilboa, Gamliel, Bergera, & Ali, 2018; Ismail & Yunan, 2016). Service quality acts as a critical predictor of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Ismail and Yunan (2016) confirmed that the capability of service providers to implement the five dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy in performing daily jobs might lead to better customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

**Differentiation of services.** Service quality is often perceived as superior if the services are distinct from those offered by competitors. For example, Ramamoorthy et al. (2018) related service quality to the mix of marketing techniques used by service industries. Firms manipulate product, place, price, and promotion to differentiate the services of their organization from those of another (Dhurup, 2017). Customer service is a succession of activities through which the club's management and staff interact with customers. Customers yearn for reliable, personalized service, and they expect a conducive facility in exchange for their patronage. For clubs to maintain a competitive advantage, service quality must be superior (Dhurup, 2017). This type of differentiation may translate into customer retention.

The same differentiation of services is essential in the health and fitness sector. Service quality has become of prime importance in the competitive environment of the fitness industry (Polyakova & Mirza, 2016). Tsitskari, Tzetzis, and Konsoulas (2017)

concluded that customers in health and fitness clubs are demanding and have high expectations, thereby challenging health and fitness clubs to meet these expectations. Therefore, understanding the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions is invaluable to fitness clubs seeking ways to retain existing customers (Polyakova & Mirza, 2016).

**Effects of service quality on customer loyalty.** Previous research has demonstrated a direct link between service quality and customer loyalty (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Furthermore, customer satisfaction is a significant driver of the future behavior of customers (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Potential customer perception of an organization's corporate social responsibility activities, service quality, and transparency effect relationship quality constructs such as trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Corporate social responsibility and company reputation also have positive relationships with customer satisfaction and trust. Customer trust continues to have a significant positive influence on customer loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2016). The most substantial challenge for a business is customer retention and service quality (Premkumar & Rajan, 2017).

The health and fitness club industry is a dramatically changing market, and service quality is key to attaining a competitive advantage. Service quality continues to gain popularity to improve customer retention. The effects of service quality on customer satisfaction and attitudinal or behavioral intention are crucial to create and maintain a competitive advantage (Argan, Argan, Kose, & Soner, 2015). There are links between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty, and they have a positive influence on

shaping satisfaction and repurchase intention. Customers' perceptions of service quality influence their satisfaction and intention. The service quality dimensions for fitness clubs such as personnel, tangibles, equipment, facility design, empathy, responsiveness, accessibility, ambient conditions, and assurance are essential as fitness quality indicators (Argan et al., 2015).

**Factors affecting perceptions of service quality.** Researchers have examined factors that influence how customers perceive service quality, including labeling, customer expectations, fitness quality, and customer satisfaction. The design and production of labels can improve service quality. Private labels can help to differentiate the service organization from the competition, and it enhances the perceived personality or status of customers who purchase these services. Health and fitness clubs may see improvements in service quality if they invest more in developing private labels and making brands an integral part of their service. The ability to leverage service organizations' quality and customer satisfaction by marketing private labels is essential in a very competitive service industry (Herstein et al., 2018). Therefore, the production of private labels that communicate a quality product may positively influence customer retention.

Customer perceptions of service quality can lead to an improved competitive advantage, but perceptions of service quality can differ, as customer expectations may not match reality. Customers compare perceived service quality with their expectations about the service, and they act accordingly (Tan, Chew, & Hamid, 2016). Service quality is

essential in a competitive market. A business that caters to customers' needs will gain the loyalty of customers, and this may result in repeat business (Tan, Chew, & Hamid, 2016).

Allan (2016) contended that service quality, coupled with customer loyalty, has a positive effect on customer retention. Customers' perceived service quality is a precursor to customer retention, and it enhances patronage in the market, which affects the market performance of the organization. Customer service and service delivery are essential, as they form the basis for ongoing service. Service quality is the result of attending to the needs, demands, and expectations of customers through service delivery or customer care (Allan, 2016).

In addition to labeling and customer expectations, fitness quality can also influence how customers perceive service quality. High satisfaction levels might lead to a substantial commitment for products such as spinning, yoga, and Zumba in fitness centers. Customers who frequently participate in fitness services have an increased likelihood of loyalty to the brand of the fitness center. However, customers who rarely use fitness centers are less likely to be loyal customers. Fitness centers can measure the success of their current services or launch new services for critical success. Health and fitness club managers must be aware of several dimensions of fitness-related service quality and how they relate to their facilities. Club customers also have perspectives on fitness quality, and if they are satisfied, they may serve as potential pioneers for the organizational leadership or innovation (Argan et al., 2015).

Customer satisfaction is a direct link to service quality. Because service quality mainly depends on tangible dimensions of service, managers need to deliver a high level

of service to their customers by enhancing tangible dimensions and by improving the knowledge, skills, and behavior of their staff. These characteristics are significant to fitness club managers because the ability of their staff to inspire confidence and trust in customers and researchers is a vital dimension of service quality. Superior service quality has a positive influence on customer satisfaction, and it can lead to customer retention, which may improve business performance (Allan, 2016).

**Effects of fitness center attributes on perceptions of service quality.** Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2007) examined the quality management practices in the fitness industry by exploring service quality and analyzing three dimensions: physical change, including beauty and function; mental change, including harmony and self-realization; and pleasure, taking the form of social pleasure or physical pleasure. These three dimensions are the main selling points of the fitness industry. The industry offers a physical change using fitness club facilities, products, and programs while creating a mental change due to the positive results of physical change, which leads to pleasure. These three dimensions or attributes are the core of what the fitness industry offers customers (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2007).

Physical change is part of the fundamental role of health and fitness clubs. Many customers use fitness centers to improve their mental status through a myriad of programs. Along with the physical changes, health and fitness clubs offer programs such as yoga and Pilates, which have multiple positive psychological effects such as harmony, happiness, calmness, mental relaxation, self-realization, and enlightenment. Finally, health and fitness clubs may offer pleasure from social interaction with other customers

and staff, as well as the physical enjoyment of the various fitness activities (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2015).

Most people live a sedentary lifestyle, and health and fitness clubs have become even more significant from a global health perspective (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2015). Service quality in health and fitness clubs has proved profitable, and it is a place of social and physical pleasure for customers (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2015). Health and fitness clubs are quickly becoming preferred social places, and the practice of promoting fitness brings countless benefits. In an increasingly competitive environment, customers are more demanding, expect improved service quality, and are less tolerant of reduced services. Customer complaints about service quality are one cause of customer attrition (Moreira & Silva, 2016).

**Customer service.** Health club managers can predict customer retention by measuring customer satisfaction, loyalty, or commitment (Moreira & Silva, 2016). Fitness club owners can use complaint behavior to measure customer dissatisfaction or customer attrition, but there is limited study in the area. Some customers do not complain to management or staff; instead, they complain to other customers. Customers sometimes complain by word of mouth, by third-party responses, and through complaints expressed via external parties directly involved with the fitness center who has some influence on current and potential customers. Customers also complain through private actions, including canceling membership, warning friends through social media and other outlets, or ceasing to patronize clubs (Moreira & Silva, 2016).

Customer service is a vital element in making the customer-to-business relationship work. Company leaders who make quality customer service a priority have emerged as strategic game changers for retaining profitable corporate customers. Service quality is an essential factor in developing a sustainable structure for health and fitness clubs. Customers tend to go to health and fitness clubs both for fitness, as part of a healthy lifestyle, and for social needs. Customers must perceive the health benefits through the service health and fitness clubs provide (Yildiz, Polat, Sonmezoglu, & Cokpartal, 2016).

The relationship between the quality of interaction and output affects the way customers perceive service quality. The daily interaction with managers and staff can affect the perceived service quality and the customers' willingness to continue their membership. Health and fitness club managers and staff need to establish and maintain positive relationships with their customers and to focus on customer expectations, attitudes, and behavior changes (Yildiz et al., 2016).

**Customer experience.** The experience customers have at the club has a significant influence on their perceptions of service quality. Customers who were customers of other clubs may have higher expectations than others. The customers' expectations may also be higher because of the equipment and physical appearance of the facility. These higher expectations may affect customers' perceptions of service quality. Managers must focus on meeting or exceeding their customers' desires for service quality. Health and fitness club managers can meet or exceed their customers' perceptions of service quality by establishing and maintaining innovative marketing

principles, and this can be very effective for customer retention and competitive advantage (Yildiz et al., 2016).

Customers measure service quality in health and fitness clubs by how they view the physical environment and their interactions with staff, and how these two enhance their living environment. Customer perception of the physical environment is a significant element of service quality. The ambiance, which includes lighting, music, decors, color, and even fragrance, can affect the way customers perceive value. Also, customers' interactions with fitness staff have a profound effect on their perceptions of service quality. Therefore, managers must be aware of the challenges of using automation. The best results come through the customer fitness staff or person-to-person interactions in the service delivery process. The purchase intention comes from consumers' perception of the benefits they receive from the service encounter. Fitness clubs must provide amenities to enhance the environment and facilities to enhance the experience of the customers (Cheung & Woo, 2016).

**Servicescape.** Service quality viewed through the lenses of servicescape adds a unique perspective to the importance of service quality in customer retention. Servicescape, or the service setting, is the atmosphere and physical environment in which service occurs. A better understanding of the servicescape in health and fitness clubs allows sport facility managers to increase the level of service they deliver to customers. Servicescape focuses on the physical facilities where managers perform and deliver service and where the customer consumes the service. There are multiple factors in the servicescape theory for fitness centers: (a) accessibility/convenience, (b) facility layout,



(c) facility design, (d) equipment condition, (e) ambiance, (f) facility system, (g) signage, and (h) social factors. These factors are essential for designing, planning, and constructing health and fitness clubs (Kim et al., 2016).

Servicescape is a core product of health and fitness clubs with facility-driven services that provide environments for the activities that occur therein. To a large extent, the servicescape of health and fitness clubs is equipment dependent. Machines with the latest technology to exercise can increase motivation. Fitness clubs can provide interactive workouts with feedback for measuring effectiveness.

### **Customer Satisfaction**

Health and fitness clubs are service organizations and realizing this is essential to make their customers delighted with the service, facilities, and advice they receive. The demand for health and fitness services has increased because of a general recognition that fitness and exercise may improve a person's physical and mental health, leading to a higher quality of life. Therefore, health and fitness clubs face an increased responsibility to satisfy customers in an increasingly competitive fitness industry market (Zopiatis, Theocharous, Constanti, & Tjiapouras, 2017).

**Factors that determine customer satisfaction.** The development of customer satisfaction is an essential component of customer retention for all service industries that include health and fitness clubs. Suwono and Shambling (2016) posited that in health and fitness clubs, customer satisfaction hinges on the quality of the physical environment, the quality of the services they provide, the frequency of improvements to the facilities and employees, customer engagement, and customers' perceptions of their own physique.

The physical environment a customer experience has a direct result on their intentions to repurchase (Zopiatis et al., 2017).

Previous research has demonstrated that a beautiful physical environment is imperative for the development of customer satisfaction (Suwono & Shambling, 2016). It is an essential factor to help health and fitness clubs to maintain their customer base. In addition to the physical environment, health and fitness clubs need to use knowledgeable, well-trained, customer-oriented front-line employees to offer high quality and a wide variety of services. An appealing service environment helps to maintain and promote customer satisfaction (Zopiatis et al., 2017).

Customer satisfaction can result in continuous improvements in meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Customer satisfaction is an essential differentiator, and it has become an integral part of a business strategy. Also, customer satisfaction helps to build loyal customers, in turn, may spread the word to others, influencing others to become customers. Positive word of mouth is highly credible, effective, and in most cases, free. Customer satisfaction is the best indicator of the likelihood of a customer repurchasing. However, satisfaction with a product or a service may not guarantee that a consumer will persist with the product or the service (Tripathi, 2014).

The concept of customer engagement as a predictor of customer satisfaction is rapidly growing in academic marketing literature. However, there is little knowledge regarding the relationship between customer engagement and customer value. Customer engagement enhances an organization's performance and affects consumer behavior, as well as brand referrals (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Tripathi (2014) confirmed that

companies with high engagement levels yielded a return on investment of 8% above the industry average, while companies with low engagement levels saw their profits drop 23% below the industry average. Companies that engage their customers perform better. Customer engagement involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand. Customer satisfaction and customer engagement are both critical to retain customers, but an engaged customer is not necessarily a satisfied one.

Customers' perceptions of the success or failure of their membership depend on the practices of the fitness centers, such as Gold's Gym and World Gym. Customer appearance and physique might play a critical role in contributing to attaining primary benefits and satisfaction from health and fitness clubs. Customers may make social comparisons with others, such as staff instructors or personal trainers, who may have physiques that are closer to the idealized and socially constructed standard of beauty. These perceptions may influence customer satisfaction and loyalty to fitness centers. The provision of service quality at fitness centers might help customers to see the benefits of their workouts (Smith, Murray, & Howat, 2014).

The perceived benefits of service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty are relevant for health and fitness clubs and their sustainability. The quality of the physical environment is not as influential as the perceptions of the customer. Both staff interaction and perceived results are factors in customer satisfaction. In an ocular-centric environment, health and fitness clubs play a paradoxical role in both: the site for the improvement of physical capital and the site where one's physical capital is on direct comparative display with others (J. Smith et al., 2014).

The level of comfort customers have with their physiques can significantly and negatively affect the relationship between staff service quality and the attainment of results. Any physical discomfort from the customer may negatively mediate the relationship between staff interaction quality and results. Consequently, managers should consider some of the potential implications of body perceptions and how these perceptions may influence how customers view their service (Smith et al., 2014).

Some health and fitness club staff, including fitness instructors and personal trainers, often wear attire that emphasizes their physique. Health and fitness club managers may consider a dress code that is still appropriate for the training context of the role, but that may not emphasize the staff member's physique quite as much. In contrast, some customers might not be as confident in fitness instructors who do not have their physiques on display (Hutson, 2016). A visible and fit physique is a confirmation of the instructor's ability to provide results. Fit trainers and staff provide additional motivation to some customers to help them to achieve their goals. Some fitness centers have tried reducing the number of mirrors at the front of the class area. However, modifying the physical design through the reduction of mirrors could limit effective nonverbal communication between the instructor and class customers, causing the instructor to fail to recognize members' needs, which may include an affirmation of their effort (Smith et al., 2014).

Making multiple changes to address issues of customer comfort regarding physique may inadvertently result in a negative influence on customer satisfaction. Managers should focus on the fitness club staff and customer engagement by matching

based on gender, age, and fitness level. Customer engagement could help to encourage customers who view their physiques more negatively to find their comfort zones. Finally, training the staff to be aware of and empathetic toward customers' perceptions of their physiques and feelings about their bodies may enhance customers' perceived service experiences (Smith et al., 2014).

**Measuring customer satisfaction.** One problem regarding customer satisfaction is paying too much attention to different approaches to attracting new customers and not focusing on customer retention. Companies communicate with customers through social marketing, providing members with higher levels of customer awareness and, in turn, attracting more customers and maintaining them as loyal customers. Social marketing uses the principles and techniques of commercial marketing to transmit beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in the community (Saghi & Lotfabadi, 2016).

Arefi, Tavakoli, and Heidari (2016) argued that managing customer satisfaction measurement involves a full cycle of improvement and business excellence from the customers' perspective. The primary purpose is not measuring customer satisfaction but improving the perceived health benefits for the customer. A common problem in health and fitness clubs is that some consumers leave and then decide to return because of a perception of better service. Service organizations that require customer membership must monitor and evaluate consumer retention, satisfaction, and loyalty to facilitate customer intentions. The concept of consumer services requiring paid membership spans across industries, including health clubs, country clubs, sports organizations, retail warehouses, museums, vacation rental organizations, and professional organizations.

Membership organizations consistently face the challenge of retaining customers, and they struggle with consumer satisfaction. Perceived satisfaction differs between those who continue their membership and those who let their membership lapse (Ashraf, Ilyas, Imtiaz, & Ahmad, 2018).

**Customer satisfaction in health and fitness clubs.** Health and fitness clubs are characteristically different from other service industries. At health and fitness clubs, customers are typically in the facility and participate in the service delivery process. Active customer participation is necessary, but it is not the only factor that contributes to the success of the service outcomes. The participatory customer relationship is essential to the service environment of health and fitness clubs because the relationship can lead to increased revenue and the perception of belonging (Chiu, Shin, & Lee, 2017).

Health and fitness club managers must design the appropriate communication channels with their customers to foster customer participation and involvement by allowing customers to express their desires and needs as part of the organization. The customer and club relationships start with the staff in the service environment engaging, with highly involved customers, resulting in better employee performance and organizational effectiveness. The customer's positive perceived value and satisfaction lead to a better service environment and a preference to renew his or her membership (Chiu et al., 2017).

Customer satisfaction is uniquely approached in health and fitness clubs because these businesses are providing a service that has multiple health benefits (Newton et al., 2015). The transtheoretical model of behavior change helps health and fitness club

managers to understand and predict health-related behavior. Many people do not perform enough physical exercise to appreciate the benefits of physical activity. One way to increase or promote activities is to modify or build up health and fitness clubs but modifying the environment alone may not encourage use (Newton et al., 2015). The transtheoretical model of behavior change predicts that attendance behavior and exercise behavior are indicators of retention or attrition. Knowing the reasons why customers leave may help to improve customer retention (Carrera, Royer, Stehr, & Sydnor, 2018).

The use of the health and fitness club services has a direct effect on the health, fitness, and wellness of the customer, creating shared value for both. Value co-creation has a direct relationship with customer satisfaction. Customers must first understand their personal health goals when signing up for membership. Customers are more likely to continue if they understand these goals. Health and fitness club managers must help this process by making sure their customers articulate the outcomes they want when they join the club (Aggarwal & Basu, 2014).

Health and fitness club managers are instrumental in ensuring their customers understand and meet their fitness goals. Health and fitness club managers should care about the effort customers exert because it has a direct bearing on the customers' satisfaction. Health and fitness clubs that track customers' participation and provide timely feedback on customer progress keep their customers engaged. An engaged customer base can improve customer satisfaction. The quality of service encounters can improve through educating and training the fitness staff and having regular assessment

and feedback, careful recruitment, and incentive structures in the fitness center

(Aggarwal & Basu, 2014).

### **Transition**

The objective of Section 1 was to inform the reader about the effects of improving customer retention in health and fitness clubs. Customer attrition has an adverse impact on the fitness industry, communities, and the economy. The purpose of the qualitative multiple case study is to explore business strategies to improve managerial engagement in health and fitness clubs that may lead to improving customer retention, possibly resulting in fitness benefits. The findings may be useful within the fitness industry to develop strategies to improve customer retention and to create tools that managers can use in this process. In addition to a discussion regarding the significance of the study, I noted improvements in business practices and contributions to social change. A detailed literature review reflects insights from scholars of the value of strategies necessary for health and fitness club owners to succeed in the long term. Creating retention strategies might reduce the costs of turnover and improve customer retention.

Section 2 includes the research method, clarifying the focus of the qualitative multiple case study, and it discusses the research design, which may promote understanding of how to improve customer retention. It also includes a review of the research method, design, and discussion on how to research ethically. Information surrounding the data-collection process, techniques instruments, and the analysis process conclude in Section 2. Section 3 will provide a synopsis of the study and a presentation of



the collection of data and the findings. I will conclude Section 3 with recommendations for future research.

## Section 2: The Project

In this section, I provide information on the research method and design I have chosen to address the problem statement. I describe the participants and the role of the researcher. I justify the selected research method and design, and I provide information about the population and the sampling. I also include a write up on ethical concerns, data collection instruments, and the steps I plan to take to ensure reliability and validity. I explore the following central research question: What strategies do some managers use to improve customer retention? The interview questions focus on the following topics: What strategies do managers use to improve customer retention? Describe some of the barriers to improve customer retention? What programs have managers implemented to improve customer retention?

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to find the strategies that health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention. The participants were six managers from five health and fitness clubs in Southeast Texas who have had success improved customer retention. The implications for positive social change include the potential to increase employment opportunities and to provide better health outcomes for customers of health and fitness clubs. The information health and fitness club managers provide may contribute to social change and improve customer retention for health and fitness clubs. The recommendations of this doctoral study may include new strategies to improve customer retention. The likely implications for positive social change also include an increase in sustainable business practices.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Researchers should act as an unbiased data-collecting instrument without influencing the answers or the outcome of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I have worked in the health and fitness industry for over 20 years. However, my background and relationship with health and fitness clubs did not impede my research. To accomplish this, I followed the guidelines outlined by Salmona, Kaczynsk, and Smith (2015), who stated that researchers should use systematic approaches to data collection in line with research questions in order to avoid bias and to ensure reliability. I avoided bias and ensured reliability by outlining my data collection and analysis steps and by using a systematic approach to data collection in line with the research question.

In the Belmont Report, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (1979) established ethical principles to protect humans during research. I followed the three ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report: respect of persons, beneficence, and justice (see National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research, 1979). My role as the researcher was to identify the participant selection criteria, recruit participants, collect data, analyze the data I collected, and adhere to the three basic ethical principles of research involving human participants (see Department of Health, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that researchers should avoid exposing participants to undue harm, whether physical or psychological. To that end, I adhered to the ethical guidelines and policies established by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). My role in this research was to explore member retention strategies that effectively reduce customer switching. Yin (2018)

proposed using an interview protocol to reduce bias and to increase reliability in studies that involved gathering data about a phenomenon. Bernard (2017) contended that interviewers mitigate bias by remaining unbiased and acting as investigators. I remained open minded and followed the interview protocol to mitigate bias and to ensure a consistent process.

Six participants were selected to participate in face-to-face interviews based on their availability. Moloczij et al. (2017) posited that using audio recording adds a formal structure to the interview process. I audio-recorded the interviews and then analyzed the data. The participants used their experiences in health and fitness clubs to answer the interview questions about improving customer retention, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. After the interviews, I immediately transcribed the participants' responses. I used NVivo software to identify emerging themes, as suggested by Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey (2015) for quantitative studies.

### **Participants**

Greenwood (2016) stated that the selection of participants requires appropriate management premised on eligibility criteria specific to the study. The eligibility requirements for participants are critical to the research because of the potential influence on the quality and applicability of the research findings (He, Carini, Sim, & Weng, 2015). Participants in this study were required to have three or more years of managerial experience in health and fitness clubs in Southeast Texas. More specifically, potential participants were required to have a fitness background and knowledge of the health and

fitness club's customer retention strategy. The six participants participating in this study met the requirements.

Before starting data collection, I received IRB approval. I also received permission from administrators of five health and fitness clubs to invite volunteers from their managerial staff who had successfully retained members to participate. The request included the purpose of the study and sample interview questions. It also assured participants and health and fitness club proprietors that I would follow ethical guidelines. I contacted the managers of the health and fitness clubs via e-mails or social media accounts that were used by the health and fitness clubs to set up interviews for the study. The potential participants received an informed consent form before the interview in person or via e-mail. For convenience and efficiency, the interviews were onsite in a location that provided adequate privacy.

In a case study design, the average sample population consists of 10 to 20 participants (Yin, 2018). Some respondents might require a more in-depth questioning to give these data the depth necessary to accomplish validity (Yin, 2018). Using purposeful sampling assures the requisite knowledge of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In this study presented here, I collected data from six managers that worked in five fitness clubs. I conducted the interviews onsite in a provide location using the interview question listed in Appendix B.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The three methods researchers can use are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative methods are used to share real-life experiences and to draw logical comparisons (Tsang, 2014). Qualitative methods can lead to a rich understanding of the subject under study (Galloway, Kapasi, & Whittam, 2015). Furthermore, Mahoney and Vanderpoel (2015) concluded that researchers could neither quantify nor give credibility to the meanings that the participants might assign to their thoughts and feelings on a phenomenon in question. Because this research aimed to understand the strategies used by a group of people, I used the qualitative method and systematically interpreted the data to avoid including the participant's interpretations of their thoughts.

Quantitative and mixed-methods methodologies were not appropriate for my study. The quantitative method is not suitable when the objective is to explore the lived experiences of participants that would be difficult to quantify into accurate, statistical generalizations using hypothesis testing, set parameters, and statistical analysis (Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015; Yazan, 2015). Quantitative methods can also be used to validate the outcomes of previous studies using a hypothesis (Bryman, 2017). However, I did not aim to validate a hypothesis with this study. Researchers have also agreed that the quantitative method is suitable when the focus is to establish the relationships between independent and dependent variables (Maxwell, 2016). The study presented here, however, was not designed to test a theory or the relationships between variables.

Mixed-methods research combines characteristics from both qualitative and quantitative designs (Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). As the qualitative method is adequate and appropriate for my study, mixed methods were not a suitable choice. Researchers typically use the mixed-methods approach when neither a qualitative nor a quantitative approach is enough as a stand-alone method to conduct a study (Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). In the case of my study, the research question could not adequately answer by using a quantitative design. I chose the qualitative method for the study as the advocacy, or participatory worldview can allow the researcher to explore the in-depth experiences of participants. In the study, participants shared details on what strategies health and fitness club managers could develop to retain customers.

### **Research Design**

The most favored qualitative designs to examine questions of customer retention are grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study (Möller & Parvinen, 2015). Of the cultural qualitative designs, action observation, focus groups, and interpretive and descriptive interviews are useful tools for customer retention (Möller & Parvinen, 2015). Tsang (2014) argued that the flexibility of a multiple case study design enhances the paradigm for customer retention research. Furthermore, a case study is a valuable design to explore a phenomenon within a real-life environment (Yin, 2018).

Case study design enables a researcher to frame and debate one or more cases in real-life settings to explore a problem holistically and deeply (Yin, 2018). Also, the results from a case study design permit the researcher to explore a problem within a

realistic setting (Yazan, 2015). The findings from a case study design allow a researcher to explore and contextualize varied participants' knowledge and experience of a single problem (Morse, 2015). A multiple case study design adds more depth and is more robust than a single case study (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I collected data from multiple case studies and interpreted the interview data within the contextualized experiences of each participant.

I considered the characteristics of a case study before inviting health club workers to participate in my study. Yin (2018) stated that the case study design could facilitate a subjective exploration of the feelings and perceptions of the participants. The flexibility of a multiple case study design makes it useful for a glance into a real-life context (Tsang, 2014). Möller and Parvinen (2015) also recommended using the multiple case study design for customer retention research because of the intricacy of the health and fitness club service environment. Narrative research, ethnography, and phenomenology were not appropriate for the study because these methods do not provide an in-depth understanding of the problem. An exploratory case study was the best choice to explore the perceptions and experiences of health and fitness club managers and the customer retention strategies necessary to implement and improve customer retention.

Because qualitative data are subject to interpretation, it is essential to verify data with triangulation and member checking of participant observations (Hoejmose, Roehrich, & Grosvold, 2014). Therefore, I used triangulation and member checking participant observations to explore real-life marketing perspectives on customer retention in health and fitness clubs.



The notion of saturation has developed and changed over the years within qualitative research designs (Guetterman, 2015). For saturation or completeness in this case study, I needed a purposeful sample of about 20 expert participants. Fusch and Ness (2015) agreed that data saturation occurs when no new information, coding, themes, or results emerge. A data saturation check followed the third participant's interview to evaluate the existence of any similarities and repetition of information, codes, and themes. Fusch and Ness (2015) posited that conducting further interviews is unnecessary if data saturation occurs.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population considered in this study was health and fitness club managers who oversee the customer retention strategy of a Southeast Texas fitness center. After IRB approval, I contacted potential participants who fit the eligibility criteria. Gile, Johnston, and Salganik (2015) stated that engaging an adequate number of sample respondents from the target population could be difficult. Gile et al. (2015) described a purposeful sample as participants with significant traits and information necessary for an investigation of the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling provides the freedom to question participants who had the most knowledge of the phenomenon under examination Möller & Parvinen, 2015). I used purposeful sampling in this study to provide the freedom to question participants who had the most knowledge of customer retention in health and fitness clubs.

Yin (2018) recommended using triangulation, including in-depth interviews, to convey a convergence of evidence necessary for an exploratory case study design with a

small sample population. For saturation or completeness, Möller and Parvinen (2015) argued that a researcher needs to interview a purposeful sample of six management-level experts, and performed methodological triangulation including participant interviews, member checking, and participant observations (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). For saturation or completeness, I interviewed a purposeful sample of six managers from health and fitness clubs, and performed methodological triangulation including participant interviews, member checking, and participant observations. Ando, Cousins, and Young (2014) stated that data saturation is the point at which no new themes emerge from the data. To ensure data saturation, I interviewed additional participants until no new themes emerged. The small number of participants for the multiple case study may give a deeper understanding of the experience of the phenomenon under exploration. The use of purposeful sampling is appropriate for case study research, which justifies the sample size (Möller & Parvinen, 2015).

### **Ethical Research**

Research is a method of acquiring new information through the investigation and review of existing sources to reach a conclusion or to establish facts. Investigators must protect participants' privacy throughout the research process (McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015). The participants will review the informed consent form before consenting to the interviews. The consent form lists all the applicable privacy data, except for personal and institutional names. The participants may withdraw from the study at any time by informing me by mail or e-mail. Should a participant withdraw, all

his or her information will be void, and I will not use it for the study. There are no incentives for participating in the study.

Privileged documentation that I obtain for the sole purpose of adding numerical or subjective content is proprietary information, and I will safeguard it. To protect the names of each individual and organization, no formal or company names will appear on any documents throughout the study. To ensure confidentiality, I will not use the name of any participant or name of any business in this study. To protect the rights of the participants, I will store all electronically scanned or collected data I record, transcribe, or assimilate for the study in a safe for 5 years. All media storage will have a security passcode key for system entry. I will delete data from electronic files, shred paper files, and destroy all files after 5 years of storage.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As the researcher, my role was to be the primary instrument for data collection. I used in-depth, face-to-face interviews of health and fitness club managers to learn more about effective member retention strategies. Following the format established by Stake (1995) and Yin (2018), the methods of data collection for my study consisted of interviews, digital recordings, and member checking. By interview, member checking, and observation, I accumulated data, meanings, and descriptions of real-life experiences of the participants.

An interview protocol is a detailed set of procedures developed to ensure that each interview is consistent and to ensure reliability (Brinkmann, 2016). To that end, I sent each participant a preinterview email containing the interview protocol and sample

questions to give them an idea of what to expect during the interview session. The e-mail contained proposed dates and times for a 45-minute interview. Each interview began with a scripted greeting to set the tone for the interview (see Appendix C). To ensure the validity of the study, I observed protocols for trustworthiness, kept the instrumentation simple, used synthesis, and used the proper industry terminology for descriptions. Also, to achieve a new understanding of participant responses, I used member checking to allow participants to clarify responses, to provide additional data to confirm the accuracy of the data I collected, and to affirm the accuracy of the study findings.

Harvey (2015) indicated that researchers could use member checking to ensure that participants confirm responses for accuracy. In addition to member checking, I e-mailed each participant a transcript of their interview recordings and asked them to review the information for any errors or missing information to ensure the accuracy of the interview data. I asked participants to provide this feedback within 48 hours from receipt of the e-mail. The space-time code techniques and standard qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12, was used to identify themes and patterns within the interview information. To obtain consistency in the study, I asked each participant the same set of questions. Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that to develop the instrument, the researcher should use open-ended interview questions to allow participants the freedom to answer questions. I used open-ended interview questions (see Appendix B) to develop the instrument, to allow participants the freedom to answer the fundamental research question.

Zamawe (2015) posited that qualitative research usually produces large amounts of data in the form of transcripts and notes. The systematic and rigorous preparation and analysis of qualitative data are usually labor intensive and time consuming. To lessen the burden on the researchers should be aware of the possibilities of using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software such as ATLAS.ti and NVivo. I used NVivo for this study because of the way the software handles research designs. Additionally, NVivo helped to improve the accuracy of qualitative studies, and it reduces the burden associated with manual coding.

### **Data Collection Technique**

The data collection process for the multiple case study will consist of conducting semistructured, face-to-face interviews on site, using the questions listed in Appendix C. As the interviewer, I captured the interviews with the participants using my cell phone as the digital recorder. The data included responses from the semistructured interviews from each participating health and fitness club manager.

Houghton et al. (2015) concluded that the semistructured interview technique includes a line of questioning with the intent to clarify themes by guiding the dialogue in the direction of the issues that drive the topic of interest. Semistructured interviews may uncover significant and perplexing components of a company's behavior (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2015). Marshall and Rossman (2016) agreed that using general themes and open-ended questions is the best practice for interviewing managerial participants. I used open-ended questions to support autonomy for health and fitness club managers to share their knowledge and to engage their imaginations while revealing their

experiences and opinions (see Appendix C). I reviewed the responses with the participants as well as e-mailing the final transcript for review, with a request that they return it within 48 hours of receipt.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Stake (1995) stated that keeping a journal of dates, contact information, visual clues, keywords, and observations can aid during the interview process. I keep a detailed journal of the interview process. I used my cell phone to store and organize my data and create a labeling system to maintain the privacy of the participants' information. Marshall and Rossman (2016) recommended detail labeling of audio recordings for ease of identifying transcripts. I created a labeling system that will involve removing the participants and company names and replacing them with codes known only to me. For example, I used participant 1 through participant 6. The research effort included a journal to document my observations, including the tone, language, and mannerisms of the health and fitness club managers during the interviews. I organized them by the applicable themes and patterns using the words and phrases of the participant. I organized the data files by topic in a paperless format with a virtual backup copy on a vaulted external hard drive. After 5 years, I will remove the digital information, shred the hard copies of the information, and mix the shredded material.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from qualitative studies are in an unstructured format, and there is often a large quantity, which makes analyzing and interpreting the data challenging for the novice researcher (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2016). Data analysis must address the research

question sequentially and logically (Yin, 2018). The four types of triangulation in a qualitative case study are investigator triangulation, data triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and methodological triangulation (Levitt, 2018). I used methodological triangulation for my study. Methodological triangulation involves using the interview transcript and notes to (a) confirm findings, (b) compare interpretations, (c) mitigate bias, and (d) enhance the validity of the outcome (Holmes & Welby, 2015).

Researchers use the case study approach to gain an understanding of the perspectives of participants (Zachariadis, Scott, & Barrett, 2013). The data analysis for the study involved an interview and member checking of coding, notes, and participant observation coding using NVivo 12. Houghton et al. (2015) suggested that NVivo is a valuable tool for data management and analysis. NVivo can help researchers to examine the knowledge and experience of the participants during the research process (Houghton et al., 2015).

The objective of the analysis in the study was to articulate a textual description of the experiences of participating health and fitness clubs' managers, who were successful in improving customer retention. Researches used NVivo or qualitative software to establish continuity, assist in uncovering patterns, and themes from the archived data and to integrate the keywords and phrases that emerge from the analysis (Kan, Adegbite, Omari, & Abdellatif, 2016). I establish continuity, with the use of NVivo 12 to assist in uncovering patterns and themes from the transcribed data and integrated the keywords and phrases that emerge from the analysis. Hays et al. (2016) concluded that researchers could use triangulation to review data from multiple sources focusing on confirming

themes or recognizing patterns within the phenomenon. Kan et al. (2016) indicated that data analysis combined with the interviewer's passion, observation, and accounts is consistent with the research goals and the phenomenon in question. Malterud et al. (2016) concluded that supplemental analysis software enhances the qualitative research by adding an unbiased position and a rigorous ingredient to the process. Analytical software grants researchers a range of methods and tools to help with grouping and analysis Yin (2018). With the help of NVivo 12 I discerned the codes and emerging concepts into themes and subthemes. The last step of data analysis involved scrutiny of the data and descriptions through a review of the codes drawing on customer retention management theory (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002), the research question, and the extant literature.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative studies, reliability is the consistency of the study such that other researchers can replicate it (Bernard, 2017; Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). Validity stems from the reliability of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Morse (2015), specific methods are necessary to validate a study, and there are several steps to ensure integrity and consistency of approach through the procedures in a qualitative study. The study presented here included efforts to produce a reliable study that was also valid. These efforts included detailed documentation and rigorous data collection methods.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to the quality of the research findings. Reliability in a qualitative case study is an assurance of the dependability of the results through the research



instrument due to internal and external validity (Daniel, 2018). I ensured reliability by ensuring the data collection was complete and consistent for all participants and maintained integrity in the documentation process. Recording interviews and keeping a journal to capture body language and other items the recorder cannot capture will add to the reliability (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morse, 2015). For added consistency and integrity, the researcher should crosscheck the participants' codes with the transcribed interview and journal notes (Hussein, 2015). For added consistency and integrity, I immediately crosschecked each participants' codes with my recorder and journal notes. To facilitate the integrity of the data, the researcher should review the interview transcript through member checking (Houghton et al., 2015). To facilitate the integrity of the data, I performed member checking after each interview.

Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman (2017) posited that dependability means that the researcher can replicate the study's findings with similar participants in similar conditions. Qualitative case study researchers use member checking and transcript review strategies to ensure the consistency and reliability of their findings. I conducted member checking after the interviews to confirm the responses from the interview recordings. Member checking is a control process to ensure the accuracy and validity of recorded interviews (Harvey, 2015). Also, data triangulation may result in a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Reliability procedures occur when interview questions are consistent throughout the study (Chan, West, & Glozier, 2017). Chan et al. (2017) indicated that the use of consistent interview questions ensures that questions are not biased or misleading.

While interviewing participants, data saturation occurs when no new information emerges (Yin, 2018). Cypress (2017) stated that reliability in qualitative research corresponds with dependability, ensuring that the data are reliable and credible while minimizing errors and biases. To maintain the quality of this qualitative research, I incorporated credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability in the study. Downe, Finlayson, Tunçalp, and Metin Gülmezoglu (2016) posited that the implementation of methodological triangulation and member checking would enhance the reliability of qualitative research. Houghton et al. (2015) noted that a complete representation of a phenomenon is available through the methodological triangulation of diverse data sources, which is an advantage of using case study research. Also, triangulation includes validating participant data through other sources, such as their websites and public reports.

### **Validity**

Daniel (2018) stated that researchers ensure credibility through participant engagement, observation method, and audit trails. To ensure credibility, I used member checking to ensure that the data represent the perspectives of the participants. Daniel asserted that a consistent, repeatable process for collecting data improves reliability. I ensured the data collection was complete and consistent with all participants, and I maintain integrity in the documentation process. I recorded the interviews and kept journal entries, and then transcribed them into Microsoft Word. I used the transcribe feature in NVivo 12.

Hussein (2015) posited that crosschecking the participants' codes will add consistency and integrity to the study. For added consistency and integrity, I immediately crosschecked the participants' codes with my recorder and journal notes. I conducted member checking to facilitate the integrity of the data. Member checking is a control process to ensure the accuracy and validity of recorded interviews (Harvey, 2015). Data triangulation may result in a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Data saturation occurs in qualitative data collection when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information (Bernard, 2017; Maxwell, 2016; Morse, 2015). To establish credibility, I continued to gather data through interviews with participants until saturation occurs.

Credibility in qualitative research means that the findings from the study are acceptable from the perspectives of the participants (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Researchers add credibility to their research findings by presenting an accurate interpretation of the human experiences of relevant people (Houghton et al., 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). To ensure credibility, I adhered to the interview protocol while interviewing participants, and I spent adequate time in the interview process to gain a sound understanding of the case and meanings of the research question.

Transferability in qualitative research is how well a researcher can apply the findings of a study to other studies involving different populations but similar contexts (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Readers and research users may determine the transferability of the findings. Member checking and transcript review are two validation techniques that can improve the accuracy, credibility, reliability, and validity of a qualitative study

(Crifo & Mottis, 2016). To enhance transferability in the qualitative study, I provided the readers with a rich and detailed presentation of findings that includes direct quotes from the participants. To improve the transferability of the data, the researcher must provide a rich description of the contents and procedures of the research (Spurlin & Garven, 2016).

The concept of transferability also will create opportunities for further studies and provide a platform for effective communication among researchers (Noble & Smith, 2015). I provided a rich and exhaustive description of the context of the study to provide insights that other researchers can consider when transferring the research information to other populations or phenomena. I adhered to the data collection and analysis techniques for my study, using the interview protocol. I conducted member checking before and after the data was transcribed.

Confirmability is the degree to which the research findings are free from bias, accurate, and objective (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Additionally, researchers can improve confirmability by asking probing follow-up questions during the interviews, member checking, asking questions from different perspectives, and triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I documented all reflections regarding my personal experiences, culture, biases, and explanations that may inform and influence the research process. To ensure confirmability, I maintained objectivity, by keeping notes in a reflective journal, and remained open to redirections from the dissertation committee.

Data saturation is the point at which participants provide no new themes, ideas, or viewpoints (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017). Data saturation is the point at which a researcher has all the relevant information to understand the

phenomenon and no new insights emerge, even if the number of participants increases (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I interviewed participants until no new information emerges to ensure data saturation.

### **Transition and Summary**

Section 2 contained an overview of the qualitative multiple case study presented here. The information includes my role in addressing central parts of the research, namely (a) the purpose statement, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) data collection, and (e) ethical aspects of this research study. I have indicated the assignment of meanings to the lived experiences of participants and described how I will ensure the dependability, trustworthiness, and rigor of the qualitative multiple case study. Using the information in Section 2 concerning data collection, organization, and analysis, I have provided a basis for ethical practices in the study.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore strategies that some health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention. After interviewing six managers from five fitness centers in Southeast Texas who have successfully implemented strategies to improve customer retention, I identified one overarching theme and two subthemes. All participants emphasized the importance of service quality in improving customer retention. Within this overarching theme, the interview data revealed two subthemes: (a) customer satisfaction and (b) customer loyalty. Section 3 covers the presentation of the findings, a discussion of applications for professional practice and implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, my reflections, and a conclusion to the study.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

I created the interview questions (see Appendix B), asked the interview questions to the participants, and collected and analyzed their responses to support answering the overarching research question: What strategies do some health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention? I used Audacity® to record each interview. I used NVivo® software to transcribe and analyze the transcriptions. One overarching theme (importance of service quality in improving customer retention) and two subthemes (customer satisfaction and customer loyalty) arose from the analysis of interview responses and other relevant information from the company's website.

### **Overarching Theme: The Importance of Service Quality in Improving Customer Retention**

All six participants mentioned that service quality was critical in improving customer retention in their health and fitness club. Their responses to Interview Questions 1, 6, and 10 indicated that service quality was integral in their strategy for improving customer retention. These results corroborate results of previous research that found that customers that experience service quality has a high degree of satisfaction and are more likely to maintain their membership (Y. L. Lee, Pan, Hsu, & Lee 2019). Service quality is the customers' expectations or perceived value of the service received (Dias et al., 2019). Y. L. Lee et al. (2019) posited that retaining 5% of the existing customer base can increase profits by 25% to 75%. Additionally, securing new customer cost five times as much as retaining the current ones.

This overarching theme directly correlates with the conceptual framework and the literature reviewed in Section 1 of this study. Ahmad and Buttle (2002) stated that the premise of customer retention management theory is to focus on retaining customers by improving perceived superior service quality and by improving customer satisfaction by more effectively managing the expectations of customers. To create relevant experiences for customers and improve customer retention, managers and their staff must provide customer service and engage customers using a communication channel with which the customers identify.

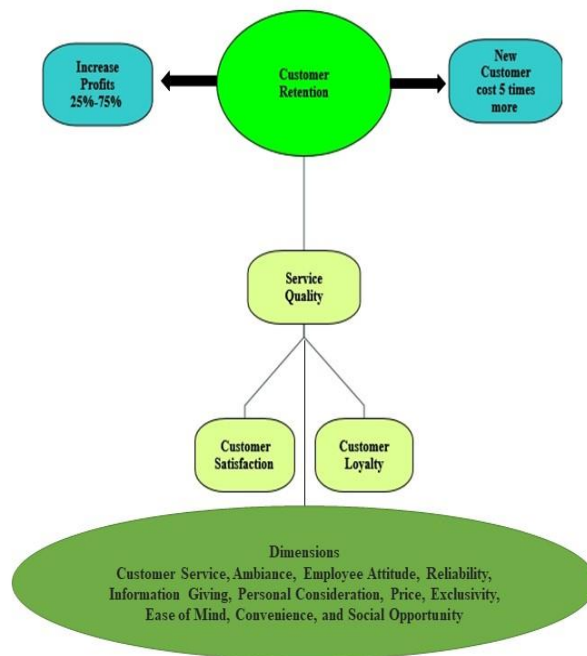
Since 2000, the fitness industry has grown considerably, thereby increasing competition for customers and making customer retention critical for continued success

(Dias, Ferreira, Romão Pereira, & Fonseca, 2019). The participants in this study agreed that retaining customers is an essential part of their success and that improving the quality of service is critical in that effort. Participant 1 from Company 1 (P1C1) said stated that customer retention is a large part of their job. P1C1 went on to say, “service quality is important, being personal with our customers and providing them excellent customer service goes a long way in retaining them.” Participant 2 from Company 1 (P2C1) agreed and said that providing service quality by building a rapport and engaging customers improved customer retention. These results indicate that service quality mainly improved through direct communication with the customers.

During the data collection process, the participants mentioned some of the critical dimensions of service quality in health and fitness clubs that have also been mentioned in the literature, such as customer service, ambiance, employee attitude, reliability, information giving, personal consideration, price, exclusivity, ease of mind, convenience, and social opportunity (see Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). The participants referred to these dimensions of service quality during the interview process. Participant 4 Company 3 (P4C3) explained how his health and fitness club distinguished itself by providing service quality and creating an ambiance that welcomed its customers. P4C3 said, “our goal is to provide value by making every customer feel special from the moment they enter the gym.” Participant 5 Company 4 (P5C4) mentioned that focusing on service quality improved customer retention. Additionally, P5C4 mentioned that the manager's attitude and giving each customer personal consideration were some of their best practices to retain customers.



Other participants highlighted the importance of other aspects of service quality that did not include direct communication with the customer during their visit to the health club. For instance, Participant 3 Company 2 (P3C2) and Participant 6 Company 5 (P6C5) shared relevant feedback on the importance of service quality in improving customer retention. Both P3C2 and P6C5 mentioned that reliability, price, and convenience were critical dimensions of service quality. P3C2 mentioned in her response that she started at the club ten years ago, and many of the customers are still with the club. Providing more evidence that service quality serves as an essential role in improving customer retention (See Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Customer Retention

**Subtheme 1: Customer Satisfaction**

Chiu, Won, and Bae (2019) suggested that a health and fitness club's customer satisfaction and perceived service quality is a significant indicator of customers' intention to recommit. All participants in this study agreed that the customer and their satisfaction was one of their top priorities. P6C5 mentioned that engaging customers and listening to and addressing their needs adds value and leads to customer satisfaction. In turn, this could lead to a customer that not only returns but could help bring in new customers. These results indicate that engaging and interacting with customers enhances customer experiences, whereas the lack of engagement and interaction could result in a customer not patronizing again.

One of the ways the study participants measured customer satisfaction was the use of social media. All study participants agreed that social media increased customer satisfaction and had an impact on improving customer retention. P1C1 mentioned that social media was an excellent marketing tool as well as a means for our customers to tell us how we are doing. Participants mentioned that Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media gave the customers an avenue to express their satisfaction. Guha, Harrigan, and Soutar (2018) surmised that social media is a two-way method of engagement between the customer and the company.

In contrast to customer-management interactions via social media, Wonsuk Cha (2019) stated that physical engagement between the customer and the service provider is necessary to have a positive effect on satisfaction and the customer's intentions to repurchase. All participants mentioned that engaging and interacting with customers was

a focus area for them and believed that it led to improvements in customer retention. Both P1C1 and P5C4 mentioned that building a rapport with customers through staff and customer interaction improved the customer's experience and satisfaction. Additionally, P3C2 and P4C3 mentioned customer and service provider interaction through personal training added value and satisfaction to the experience.

The importance of customer satisfaction in efforts to retain customers, as indicated by the study participants, directly correlates with the conceptual framework and the literature reviewed in Section 1. For example, the data collected here supports the hypothesis of Ahmad and Buttle (2002) that one way to improve customer retention is through improving customer service quality and satisfaction. The complexity formed in the relationship between the customer and service provider affects the strength and longevity of the relationship (Ahmad & Buttle, 2002). All participants agreed that the relationship formed affects customer retention. P5C4 highlighted this importance of customer relationship by stating, “customer service and customer engagement are things we do very well with regards to customer satisfaction.” Therefore, interview data demonstrated that customer service is a critical component of service quality that can impact customer retention.

### **Subtheme 2: Customer Loyalty**

Customer loyalty is the measure of the recurrence of purchases made by a customer of a company (Novianingsih, Kardoyo, & Thomas, 2019). The quality of the customer engagement comprised of satisfaction, trust, and commitment, has a positive relationship with customer loyalty (Novianingsih et al., 2019). Customer loyalty emerged

as a subtheme during the data collection process. All participants noted that customer loyalty and finding ways to create that type of relationship helped improve customer retention. P1C1 mentioned that some of her customers elected to stay with the club even though they moved out of the area. She thought that these customers were loyal to her club due to the relationships club employees formed with the customers. Likewise, P2C1 mentioned that building a relationship and getting to know customers helped create an experience that built loyalty with customers.

Srivastava and Rai (2018) stated that loyalty in a service provider or between the service provider and customer is essential to earning profits. In health and fitness clubs, the customer engagement benefits both the customer and the provider and, in turn, improves customer retention (Y. L. Lee et al., 2019). Y.L. Lee et al. (2019) posited that creating customer loyalty through interacting with customers has a positive effect on satisfaction, thus improving customer retention. P3C2 mentioned that health and fitness clubs could be a little intimidating, and customer engagement helps build loyalty by making customers feel comfortable.

All participants also mentioned loyalty programs and the impact they had on customer loyalty and improving customer retention. These loyalty programs offered incentives that reduced fees and, in some cases, waived fees for the customer and any new customer they referred. P5C4 noted that her loyalty program considered the customer, as incentives applied in different ways for each customer. Faulkner, Dale, and Lau (2019) found that loyalty programs work if appropriately incentivized and could

create loyalty. Customizing and advertising loyalty programs are an effective method to increase customer loyalty.

Loyalty, at its core, leads to customer retention and a long-term commitment to a particular product (Srivastava & Rai, 2018). Additionally, while delivering satisfactory service is vital to retain customers, creating an emotional attachment with them is equally important to lower the risk of defection, negative word of mouth, unyielding customer stay, and loss-making customer relationships. I found that customer loyalty is a critical component of service quality that impacts customer retention, a result that directly correlated with the literature reviewed in Section 1 of this study.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

During this qualitative exploratory multiple case study, I explored strategies that some health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention. After interviewing six managers from five fitness centers in Southeast Texas who had successfully implemented strategies to improve customer retention, I identified the importance of service quality in improving customer retention. Participants identified customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as critical components of service quality. By asking structured interview questions, I was able to identify how these health club managers were able to increase service quality, namely by improving customer service, ambiance, employee attitudes, reliability, information giving, personal consideration, price, exclusivity, ease of mind, convenience, and social opportunity.

Previous research has identified improving service quality as the best practice to improve customer retention. Even the best marketing programs do not match the value

and profitability of a company retaining its customers. In an intensely competitive environment, the health and fitness club industry must retain its customers to remain profitable. Y. L. Lee et al. (2019) suggested that retaining 5% of the existing customer base can increase profits by 25% to 75%. Additionally, securing a new customer costs five times as much as retaining the current ones. Customers that experience service quality through excellent customer service have a high degree of satisfaction and are more likely to maintain their membership (Y. L. Lee et al., 2019). Current health and fitness club managers may find these strategies gleaned from this study useful in improving customer retention.

### **Implications for Social Change**

If health club managers use the findings of this study to successfully improve customer retention, customers, clubs, and society could benefit. First, if health and fitness clubs retain more of its current customers, then employment opportunities within health clubs may increase. Second, customers may experience better health outcomes if they remain members of health and fitness clubs. Saghi and Lotfabadi (2016) posited that improved customer retention strategies might motivate some customers to maintain and improve their health and fitness. Third, using local service providers and generating revenue for the local economy may encourage positive social change. By implementing strategies to improve customer retention, health, and fitness clubs may be able to remain a viable part of the communities.

All participants in this study staffed a health and fitness club that served an area with many residents. The managers used local vendors to maintain the facilities, causing

a direct impact on the local economy. Besides offering employment opportunities, health and fitness clubs provide areas where customers can participate in events and programs that improve physical fitness, mental well-being, social connectedness, and sense of community. The implications are expressed in terms of tangible improvements to individual customers, local areas, surrounding businesses, cultures, or societies, as the finding could affect social change or social behavior.

The likely implications for positive social change also include an increase in sustainable business practices.

MacIntosh and Doherty (2007) understood how being competitive within the fitness industry requires a fundamental awareness of the service environment customers most desire. Saghi and Lotfabadi (2016) agreed that there are various approaches in the field of social change, such as health education and health promotion. Research on the fitness industry has placed considerable focus on service quality, particularly in equipment, programs, facilities, ancillary services, and member satisfaction and retention (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007). Improved services that lead to enhanced health outcomes for health and fitness clubs' customers create positive social change. Findings and recommendations from this study could contribute to positive social change by enhancing the health conditions of customers.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Customer retention is critical in health and fitness clubs because of its impact on profitability. There is a substantial amount of interest in the drivers of customer retention (Gonçalves, 2018). The findings of this study align with the tenets of customer retention

theory that are used by some health and fitness club managers. The knowledge from this study indicates that for managers in health and fitness clubs to sustain their business, they need to have strategies for improving customer retention. As a fitness professional, I understand the far-reaching impacts that stem from a successful health and fitness club.

The participants in this study indicated that they used three related strategies to improve customer retention: (a) improve the service quality provided to customers, (b) improve customer satisfaction, and (c) improve customer loyalty. To prevent customer attrition or customers switching to a competitor, health and fitness club managers must ensure that training their staff in customer engagement, conflict management, and customer service is a priority. Also, managers should attempt to engage new and established customers via social media, provide incentives for continued membership, and provide an organized, clean, and safe facility.

Based on the findings presented here, I recommend that health and fitness club managers focus on providing service quality through customer engagement and customer service. The health and fitness club managers interviewed in this study focused on building a rapport with customers and creating an environment that satisfied their customers. This result supported the findings of Gonçalves (2018) that the perceptions of the attributes of facilities, equipment, human resources, and accessibility were the ones that most influenced customer retention in the health and fitness clubs. The influence of customer satisfaction on retention aligns with the literature in the studies reviewed in Section 1. These studies found that customer satisfaction was a direct and indirect predictor of customer retention, but that customer satisfaction alone is not enough for



customer retention. The participants mentioned that customers stayed with the club for other reasons, such as social environments, friends and family, staff, and access.

Gonçalves (2018) also reported that some of the customers of the health and fitness clubs are not satisfied but stayed for other reasons such as accessibility, being with friends, kind employees. Therefore, health and fitness clubs should highlight and develop those characteristics within their clubs to improve customer retention.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study highlighted strategies that managers of health and fitness clubs in Southeast Texas used to improve customer retention. Health and fitness club managers face continuing challenges in retaining their customers in a growing market. Future research on customer retention in this sector could aid in the securing and maintaining of financial capital. For example, some clubs may be interested in increasing or beginning their use of social media to target existing customers over traditional marketing tactics. Additional insight into the effectiveness of social media for health and fitness club managers to attract or retain customers could provide a competitive advantage and add to the sustainability conversation. Furthermore, additional research should address specific ways in which managers could improve service quality and perceived value to retain customers.

The research presented here focused on one geographically narrow area of the United States. Future research should compare the results reported here with those from similar studies executed elsewhere. For example, researchers could consider studying successful health and fitness clubs managers from various other locations in the state of

Texas for comparison, including Dallas/Ft. Worth, Austin, and El Paso. Further examination of strategies used by health and fitness club managers to improve customer retention in different locations would allow researchers to compare strategies based on location.

Because this study only used one geographic location, the conclusions presented here may not apply to all health and fitness clubs. Therefore, further studies that include more interview questions or include a larger sample size may serve to generalize the results. These options could address the problems or needs of current customers have that are not being met or solved. Additional qualitative research, similar to that presented here, may give some greater insight into other strategies that were useful in helping health and fitness clubs improve customer retention. Other researchers should use other methodologies and designs to expand the body of research on this topic. Overall, the study findings and themes align with the conceptual framework of the theory of customer retention and the tenets of service quality.

### **Reflections**

I faced many challenges during my 31 years of military service. My doctoral journey has been equally challenging but also very rewarding. In the beginning, I underestimated the demand and the uniqueness of the process. My scholar practitioner experience at Walden University provided me an opportunity to strive for knowledge that would benefit my business and community. The literature reviewed in this study was eye opening and enriching. Despite the challenges I faced balancing my work, life, and studies, I was able to push through to the end. I expanded my knowledge of the fitness

industry and the importance of customer retention to the viability of health and fitness clubs. As a member of the fitness industry, as a result of this research, my excitement and appreciation for the improvement of customer retention in my practice have increased.

At the beginning of this study, I was sure about what I wanted to write about and the resources available. Because of the vast amount of information available to me, and because the fitness industry is expansive, I narrowed my topic considerably during my study. During the prospectus and proposal periods, at the request of my chair, I made several changes until I was able to present my best work. Because of my knowledge of the fitness industry, I had to learn how to set my personal bias aside, and I embraced my research and interactions with participants with a fresh slate. The information contained in the participant interviews showed me that there are many ways to approach customer retention. The study gave me a better understanding of the challenges some health and fitness clubs face and the lengths they will go to for continuity. I will take the lessons learned at Walden University with me on my career and life journey.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore strategies that some health and fitness club managers use to improve customer retention. I conducted semistructured interviews with six health and fitness club managers in Southeast Texas that had at least three years of experience in that role. I used member checking to ensure data saturation and validity (see Harvey, 2015). The analysis of each emergent theme was linked back to the literature, existing bodies of knowledge, and the conceptual framework for this study.

I found that service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty were the focus of the managers that had improved customer retention at their health and fitness clubs. Health and fitness club managers need to think outside of the box and focus on service quality to improve customer retention. Customer retention is part of the success of a health and fitness club.

Social media and technology are making it much easier for health and fitness clubs to retain their customers. Health and fitness club managers should include the knowledge of social media, social networks, and social responsibility into their sustainability strategy. It is vital for health and fitness club managers to meet the customer's needs and expectations by providing service quality and value. All participants revealed that valuing customer engagement and fostering personal relationships with their customers contributed to improved customer retention and profitability. The results of this study provide health and fitness club managers with more information to improve customer retention. The findings of this study could create positive social outcomes and help improve the longevity of some health and fitness clubs.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation from Research Partner

XXXXXX Fitness Center,

Houston, Texas.

August 10, 2018

Dear Rodney Macon,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I permit for you to conduct the study entitled Customer Retention Strategies in the Fitness Industry “insert all relevant fitness center.” As part of this study, I authorize you to collect data through face-to-face interviews and secondary sources like the fitness center’s website and other fitness center documents about the center’s retention strategies. Individuals’ participation in your research study will be voluntary and at their discretion.

We understand that our organization’s responsibilities include providing names of the probable participants and access to them. We will also provide you access to fitness center documents about the fitness center’s customer retention strategies. We understand that you plan to conduct face-to-face interviews with fitness center managers. We understand you will not be collecting data through observations. We also understand you will not be collecting data from our customers. We understand that as part of member checking you will confirm with the participants your understanding of the data shared by them during the face-to-face interviews. We understand that after the completion of your study you will share the results with us for our information. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization’s policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of your supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXX Fitness Center

E-mail: XXXX@XXXXXX.net

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

I will pose the following interview questions to managers of the study fitness centers:

1. Regarding retaining customers, what are some best practices for your health and fitness company?
2. What are some of the barriers to improving customer retention for your health and fitness company?
3. What are some of the causes of customer attrition?
4. What types of loyalty programs have been successful in improving customer retention for your health and fitness company?
5. How might you identify customers who are most likely to discontinue their memberships?
6. What sort of customer engagement strategies have led to improved customer retention for your health and fitness company?
7. What causes customers to switch to a competitor of your health and fitness company?
8. What switching costs do your customers experience when moving to a competitor?
9. What loyalty programs have you implemented that support the retention of customers?
10. What additional information can you provide relating to strategies your health and fitness company uses to improve customer retention?

11. How has social media affected your ability to retain customers in your health and fitness club?
12. How has your health and fitness club leveraged technology to retain its customers?



### Appendix C: Greeting Script

I want to start out by saying thank you and providing your consent to participate in this study. I understand your time is valuable and appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule and allowing me to conduct this interview. This interview will have about four questions designed to provide subjective insight about two things: (a) customer retention in your organization and (b) your best practices on retention customers.

I fully expect that this interview will last approximately 45 minutes. At any time during this interview, feel free to ask me to repeat any questions. Any information you provide within the recorded interview will be confidential and coded. I will not use your information for any purposes outside of this project. In addition, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports.

Before I begin, do I have your permission to record and begin this interview?